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# Music & Shakespeare

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The works of William Shakespeare are full of music. His plays, both comic and tragic, are punctuated with songs and dances that aim to delight, entertain and move his audience. His poetic language is bursting with colorful rhythms and sounds, inspiring musicians through the ages, across genres and around the globe to engage with his writing.

We don't know if Shakespeare was a musician himself, though the songs in his plays show that he had an acute ear for popular ballads and street music of his day. What is clear is that music played a key role in his understanding of the world around him. Throughout Shakespeare's plays, music is used as a metaphor for a gamut of emotions from joy to melancholy, from passion to bitter regret.

Scholars have counted more than 2,000 references to music in the plays, along with around 100 songs and fragments of ballads. Together with these specific musical references, Shakespeare's mastery of meter and his expressive way with words has inspired music of every style from many cultures and backgrounds. For Shakespeare, music was at the heart of the metaphysical and moral workings of the universe. He refers in his plays to the ancient concept, still current during the Renaissance, of the 'Music of the Spheres', where the influence of the stars and planets was held in perfect balance by cosmic harmony, keeping the world in order.

*The Merchant of Venice* is a clever and controversial comedy. Bassanio, a poor nobleman in Venice, needs money to woo the beautiful heiress Portia. He asks his friend Antonio for a loan, but Antonio has invested his funds in ships overseas. The moneylender, Shylock, offers the cash on the condition that he will take a pound of Antonio's flesh if the loan is not repaid within three months. Antonio goes bankrupt and Portia steps in, disguised as a young male lawyer, to save the day.

- Bassanio asks his friend Antonio for a loan.
- Portia is bound by her father's will and cannot marry who she chooses.
- Shylock lends the money to Antonio with some slightly gory conditions.
- Jessica, Shylock's daughter, runs away from home to be with Lorenzo.
- Antonio's investments are sunk and Shylock demands his arrest.
- Bassanio wins Portia as his wife.
- Portia, disguised as a lawyer, saves Antonio from his bond to Shylock.
- Bassanio and Portia argue about the loss of a wedding ring.

Gazing up to the stars with his lover Jessica, Lorenzo explains the notion of the Music of the Spheres, suggesting that the motion of the planets creates harmony in the universe.

'How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!  
Here will we sit and let the sounds of music  
Creep in our ears. Soft stillness and the night  
Become the touches of sweet harmony.  
Sit, Jessica. Look how the floor of heaven  
Is thick inlaid with patens of bright gold.  
There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st  
But in his motion like an angel sings,  
Still choring to the young-eyed cherubins.  
Such harmony is in immortal souls,  
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay  
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.'



*-The Merchant of Venice, Act V, Scene I*

*Twelfth Night* centers around the twins Viola and Sebastian, who are separated in a shipwreck. Viola (who is disguised as a boy) falls in love with Duke Orsino, who in turn is in love with the Countess Olivia. Upon meeting Viola, Countess Olivia falls in love with her, thinking she is a man.

This is the opening line of *Twelfth Night* and perhaps the most famous musical quote of all. Duke Orsino is obsessed by love. He orders his court musicians to play. His emotions are oppressing him and he hopes that if he listens to enough music, he will be able to satisfy his yearnings.



**'If music be the food of love, play on;  
Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting,  
The appetite may sicken, and so die.'**

*-Twelfth Night, Act I, Scene I*

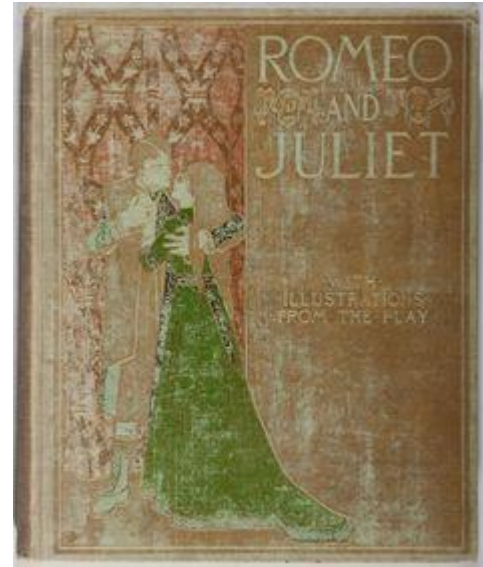
We all know *Romeo & Juliet*! This is Romeo speaking to Juliet during the balcony scene. He is essentially saying: The sound of lovers calling each others' names through the night is silver-sweet. It's the sweetest sound a lover ever hears.



**'How silver-sweet sound lovers' tongues by night.**

**Like softest music to attending ears!'**

*-Romeo & Juliet, Act II, Scene II*



*The Tempest* is set on a remote island, where the sorcerer Prospero, rightful Duke of Milan, plots to restore his daughter Miranda to her rightful place using illusion and skilful manipulation. He conjures up a storm, the eponymous tempest, to lure his usurping brother Antonio and the complicit King Alonso of Naples to the island. There, his machinations bring about the revelation of Antonio's lowly nature, the redemption of the King, and the marriage of Miranda to Alonso's son, Ferdinand. In this quote, Caliban describes the evocative, beguiling soundscape of Prospero's island.



**'Be not afeard. The isle is full of noises,  
Sounds, and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.  
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments  
Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices  
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,  
Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,  
The clouds methought would open and show riches  
Ready to drop upon me that, when I waked,  
I cried to dream again.'**

*-The Tempest, Act III, Scene II*

*The Tempest* is truly an original work, one that stands at the crossroads of theatrical history: between the Renaissance and the Baroque, between the Elizabethan theatre of the imagination and the Jacobean spectacle, between the primacy of the word and the primacy of sensory entertainment.

The common link between all of these is music. It's no coincidence that at the same time these upheavals were taking place in England, the art form known as opera was being born in Italy (the first operatic masterpiece, Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, was premiered in 1607.)

One of the most remarkable aspects of the play is how aware it is of its own historical position, how consciously Shakespeare bids farewell to past trends and welcomes new ones, reinventing himself even at the end of his career. This is particularly evident in his use of music and sound cues, which are integrated into the text in an unprecedented way.

At just over 2,000 lines, *The Tempest* is one of Shakespeare's shortest plays on the page (only *The Comedy of Errors* has fewer lines), but that doesn't mean it's necessarily the shortest in performance.

There are many places where the music takes over, and whole scenes are performed in mime and dance, or, most remarkably, with the characters themselves just standing there listening to the music along with the audience.

We have a better idea of what the music in the original production sounded like than we do for any other Shakespeare play. That's thanks to surviving settings by the composer and lutenist Robert Johnson of two songs from the play ("Full Fathom Five" and "Where the Bee Sucks").

# Who was Robert Johnson?

**Robert Johnson** (c. 1583 – 1633) was an English composer and lutenist of the late Tudor and early Jacobean eras. He is sometimes called "Robert Johnson II" to distinguish him from an earlier Scottish composer. Johnson worked with William Shakespeare providing music for some of his later plays.

His surviving compositions for the King's Men theatrical company have been dated to 1610–1617, a period when the company was using the Blackfriars Theatre as its winter base. It has been noted that the facilities at the Blackfriars Theatre offered increased scope for incidental music – songs and instrumental music – compared to the larger Globe Theatre.<sup>[4]</sup> However, the company continued to perform at The Globe, and other venues such as the court, where Johnson's theatre music would presumably also have been heard. At this time the King's Men were producing plays by Shakespeare and other playwrights such as Ben Jonson, Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher. Johnson's main claim to fame is that he composed the original settings for some of Shakespeare's lyrics, the best-known being probably those from *The Tempest*: "Where the Bee Sucks" and "Full Fathom Five." He is the only composer known to have composed the original settings of Shakespeare's lyrics. While other contemporary settings of Shakespeare's lyrics exist, for example those by Thomas Morley, they have not been proved to be connected to a stage performance.

# Robert Johnson's "Full Fathom Five"



## Full fathom five: Full Fathom Five

Sara Stowe

Johnson, R.: Where the Bee Sucks /  
Morley, T.: O Mistress Mine / Wilson, J.:  
Take, O Take Those Lips Away

Full fathom five thy father lies;  
Of his bones are coral made;  
Those are pearls that were his eyes;  
Nothing of him that doth fade,  
But doth suffer a sea-change  
Into something rich and strange.  
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell:  
Ding-dong.  
Hark! now I hear them – Ding-dong, bell.

*Ariel's song*  
Act I, Scene II

# Robert Johnson's "Where the Bee Sucks"

Where the bee sucks, there suck I.  
In a cowslip's bell I lie.  
There I couch when owls do cry.  
On the bat's back I do fly  
After summer merrily.  
Merrily, merrily shall I live now  
Under the blossom that hangs on the bough.

Ariel to Prospero  
Act V, Scene I

